

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Jesus is coming to dinner, and you are all invited along with some very important people from Galilee. It is going to be a big banquet – the dinner party of the year. It was an important dinner hosted by the leader of the Pharisees. Some of the other important guests were fellow Pharisees. Pharisees were the local religious leaders, the most important people in their community, the elite. Several bible experts, called “scribes” and “lawyers,” were also invited.

So Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat dinner with a great number of important people, because they were the only ones who were invited. We know that there was a growing conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. The Pharisees, scribes and lawyers were watching Jesus very closely. They wanted to catch him doing something wrong, they wanted to see if they could catch him breaking one of their religious laws so they would have a reason to arrest him and get rid of him.

But Jesus’ focus was on the religious leaders and what they were teaching people and what sort of example their behaviour was setting for their community. Jesus knew that their behaviour and actions were not what God wanted or expected from them.

Jesus had absolutely no standards when it came to choosing whom he ate with. His utterly indiscriminate table fellowship, in a society with strict rules of precedence and protocol for dining, caused plenty of critical comment. People noticed and complained that he ate with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes – all sorts of unsuitable people.

Now as the invited guests began to arrive, Jesus noticed that many of them started to make their way toward the head table. The head table was where the most important and special guests were expected to sit. At banquets of that time, the most important guests always arrived late.

The place of honour reserved for the important guests was the head end of a long table, or if it was a banquet where guests reclined or lay back, the middle seat at the middle couch was for them. In Jesus’ day, tables were closer to the floor than our tables are today. The guests would recline, or lie back on couches around the table. The most important or special guests would be the ones who would sit the closest to the host who had invited them, in this case it was the leader of the Pharisees.

At a really big dinner party or banquet, the tables were set up in the shape of the letter “U.” The host and most important guests would sit or recline at the centre of the “U,” in the middle seat of the middle couch. Imagine the big U-shaped table, low to the ground, with couches to lean back on all around the table. An interesting and probably relaxing way to enjoy dinner

with friends, although some of us would find it awkward.

It would be a public embarrassment to assume you were the most distinguished or important guest present, and to take that special seat, the one on the middle couch, the one closest to the host, and then have to give it up when the important guest arrived, fashionably late. It was the normal custom, to ask anyone who had decided to sit near the host, to find another place to sit so that the special or most important guest could sit near the host. A person's glorified view of him or herself would be on public display and would be seen by everyone, and would be a source of shame. It would be much better off to keep one's glorified view of oneself to oneself.

It's not only the Pharisees or gentiles who jockey for position. All the gospels report the disciples arguing among themselves as to who is more important; In Matthew, even the mother of James and John comes to Jesus and asks to have her sons sit at his right and left hand in the Kingdom. In Luke's recounting, during the last supper, the disciples are even arguing about "which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest."

So, after watching the people arrive and choose their places, Jesus tells them a parable or story about the Kingdom of God, and how God's invitation to God's banquet table works. If a guest takes the lowest or least important place possible at the table, which would be at the ends of the table, the host who in this case is God, would probably invite the guest to move up – closer to the host. But, if they come to the banquet expecting a seat at the head table, it would be terribly embarrassing or shameful to be asked to move down to a less important seat. Being humble or modest, and not thinking of yourself as the most important person, is one of the characteristics or traits of a person of authentic or true faith and a very important quality or value in God's Kingdom.

Now Jesus was not simply talking about good manners or etiquette. In the time of Jesus, everything in life was about honour, shame, social and political position. All these things were extremely important in the community. So Jesus is not just giving good advice, he is turning upside down, all the rules of expected or accepted behaviour in the world of the Middle East where he and his followers lived. He was stirring up a sort of social revolution. He wanted people to change their behaviour, to live like God wanted them to live – by God's rules – not rules that people made up.

Order or position in life is important to all of us. We are always comparing ourselves to those around us – trying to figure out our place in our families, our schools, our jobs, and our communities. Our position in any of these groups is called a pecking order. Even animals have a pecking order in their pack or flock – so that they know who the leader is and who has to follow.

In schools, our place in the order is often decided by grades; who has the highest; who has the lowest, and sometimes by how popular we are. My calculus teacher rearranged the class by grades after each set of exams, a humiliating experience for some and a feeling of superiority for others. Children and students are lower in the order than teachers. In our families, our place is decided by our age and relationships; kids in order of age are at the bottom; adults, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles are at the top. We have pecking orders at work; the newest worker is at the bottom, the boss at the top and everyone else in between.

We have pecking orders in churches with committees, councils, pastors, and bishops. We all want and need to know where we fit, what our place is in the order; at home, at school, at church, and at work. Families, schools, jobs, all need order for society to work. But the order Jesus was upset about, was the social order; how people get along and how people treat one another; how some people think they are better than others and look down on them, treating them as if they are worthless, unloved, and not cared for. And a social order can be a part of all the other orders: family, school, church and work. In families, there may be cousins or aunts or uncles that are considered less than other members. In schools, the social order may lead to ostracising or bullying. In churches the social order may lead to criticism of what one wears, tatoos, or lifestyle. At work, social order may include level of education or past experience or country of origin.

And so here comes Jesus, telling the guy who invited him to his home for the dinner party, the guy who just happens to be a leader of the Pharisees, that his and our social pecking orders are totally worthless. And Jesus is inviting this guy, and us, to turn against this social pecking order. This is one of the reasons that Jesus was killed: he stood up against the social order of his day. He stands up against all such social orders that mistreat people, treat them as lesser or not worthy.

This should be good news, news that makes us completely dependent on God's grace and God's grace alone. We can't depend on our efforts, our wealth or money, our good looks, our good qualities, our strength or intelligence, or our position in our pecking order – even if we are the leader of the Pharisees or Prime Minister or Bishop. There is NOTHING we can do before God except to depend upon God's desire to be in relationship with us and with all people. We have no claim on God, because God has claimed us and invited us to love others like God has loved us.

Through the whole Bible, we find that God is interested in two kinds of relationships: the relationship each one of us has with God; and the relationship we have with each other. We can't separate these two. We can't have a relationship with God if we have a bad relationship with the people around us. Because God invites us into relationship with Godself. God gives

us dignity and worth that we could never achieve or earn on our own.

We are asked to do the same for others by showing them that we value them and that they are people we respect and love. We are free to put them ahead of ourselves, to lead them to the seats of honour, to invite them to be our dinner guests not because of what they can do for us, but because of what God has done for all of us.

Jesus is creating a new humanity – one that has no place for our desire or need for a social order. Jesus invites us to a new vision and way of living where there is no first or last, no honour or shame, only each other, connected to one another by God’s generous love and grace.

Jesus was one of the important guests at the dinner party. After giving advice about how to behave when invited to God’s banquet, Jesus offers advice about how we are to host banquets that will include the values of God’s kingdom. Jesus talked to his host, the leader of the Pharisees about hospitality – once again turning around the social order of the day, saying: “Don’t give a dinner for your friends or family and rich neighbours in case they may invite you in return and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet invite people who have no possible way of paying you back. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, the dispossessed or deprived, and you will be blessed by God in the end because they cannot repay you.

We can be sure that there were no poor people, crippled people, sick people or homeless people at that banquet, or people with jobs that others looked down on, like tax collectors and fishermen.

Throughout his gospel, Luke has focussed on Jesus’ heart for the poor and socially unacceptable people. Hospitality is one of the marks of a faithful community. Paul wrote to the church in Rome, saying: “Contribute to the needs of saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” This morning’s letter to the Hebrews was probably written to a community of believers in or near Rome, fifty years or so after the death of Jesus. These Christians are getting discouraged as they wait for Jesus’ expected return. The writer exhorts this community to persevere in following Jesus’ example.

“Let mutual love continue,” he tells them. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” That means we never know when Jesus or an angel will come to us as a stranger, looking for us to welcome them. Living as Christ’s disciples includes not only “confessing his name” but also works of mercy and the sharing of fellowship – *koinonia* – that is Christian community.

In the world Jesus envisioned – the world we in the church are supposed to represent – everyone is invited and everyone is welcome. The community they need to rebuild has at least two critical parts. The fellowship here translated as “mutual love” is philadelphia – love of brothers and sisters. The “hospitality to strangers” is philoxenia – love of outsiders. Both are essential to a Christian community.

Hospitality is a core value for Jesus and for his church. And it should be a core value for all our congregations. In the few verses preceding today’s gospel we have these words from Luke: “People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.”

We try to show in our life together what it would mean, what it does mean, to have God in charge of our lives. The function of our worship, indeed the function of the church, is to give some glimpse of the Kingdom or reign of God. One of the things it means, is that we don’t get to choose who we hang out with. God does the inviting. And fortunately God’s imagination is much better than ours!

And so let us be aware that, “Jesus is coming to dinner!” Whenever we reach out to bring hope and healing to others, or open our hearts to those who others reject, Jesus comes to dinner. Whenever we welcome the stranger, comfort a friend in pain, wipe someone’s tears, share what we have, Jesus comes to dinner. We are called as people of faith to become a community of hope and healing, a place of hospitality where humility is the mark of true greatness. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE FOR AUGUST 28, 2022

(God of hospitality ...**hear our prayer**)

Gracious God, You are a God of hospitality; there is none like you that invites all to come to you. You have invited all to your home, to your table, and to your arms.

Lord, would that all would hear and receive this good news. Lord, help us to remember that no one is better than anyone else in your Kingdom. Help us to then treat each other with the compassion, love, respect, and kindness that Jesus showed us in the way he treated people. God of hospitality ...**Hear our prayer.**

Gifting God, You give us the gifts of the Spirit to use to further your Kingdom come, and to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. We take time to remember the people devastated by floods, fires, drought, wars and conflicts, especially in Ukraine, and to thank you for the restoration that has already taken place. Empower us to continue to be your hands and feet to continue the work that needs to be done there and in so many other places around the world. God of hospitality ...**Hear our prayer.**

Lamenting God, forgive us for the years of mistreatment of our Indigenous siblings, for abuse of their land and natural resources, and disregard for their right to self-determination. Forgive us for not loving those who are different from ourselves in colour, culture, language, sexual orientation and gender identity. Help us always to remember to invite and welcome all to your lavish banquet with love. God of hospitality ...**Hear our prayer.**

Creator God, forgive us for the devastation to your creation, its forests, its land, its birds and animals, its fresh and ocean waters, its marine life, and the air we share. Guide us as we work to reduce and reverse the damage, and work collaboratively will all nations to address the effects of climate change. God of hospitality ...**Hear our prayer.**

Generous God, because you treat us with your tender love, we take time to pray for our friends, family members and others who need you more than ever. Pour out your healing on all who need it – especially..... Be generous with your transforming love for those who needs it in their lives. Bring forth your reconciliation in families, and in all places where it is needed. God of hospitality ...**Hear our prayer.**

There is none like you, O God, in your boundless love, your extravagant

generosity, your gifting of your promises and blessings, and your welcoming hospitality. And we thank you that you are in our lives, working in us and through us to let people know your kingdom is open to all. In the name of your Son, who opened the doors for all and broke down barriers that kept people from you, **Amen.**